
In Consultation; Taking Therapy Outdoors

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Full Text

IN CONSULTATION

Taking Therapy Outdoors

How to use nature to get tough cases unstuck

By Ira Orchin

Q: I've heard that taking clients outdoors for a session can be an effective intervention. Under what circumstances and why?

A: Conventional wisdom appropriately emphasizes the need for consistency, particularly for clients who've suffered from instability. But we need to strike a balance between consistency and lapsing into stale, predictable responses. Over time, we can get habituated to the framework we've created. We can fall in love with our best explanations and approaches for our clients' difficulties, taking refuge in familiar ways of relating that insulate us rather than connect us.

At times like these, a change in environment can pave the way for something new and constructive to happen in therapy. Almost any client, except the most impaired, can benefit from a session outdoors; however, those who've spoken of an affinity for nature--or those who are timid of the outdoors--are particularly good candidates. Going outdoors together for a session can reconnect the depressed client to his vitality and strengths, and enlarge the space that a fearful and withdrawn client allows himself to occupy. The intervention can be done anywhere, even in a city. I have no difficulty finding appropriate space--such as hidden pocket parks, out-of-the-way benches, and quiet church gardens--near my Philadelphia office.

In leaving the office behind, we must manage the more fluid boundaries and novel situations that arise. Although the unexpected usually arrives in the form of a songbird or felicitous shaft of light, on occasion, disruptive events can occur. We might run into someone we know, get interrupted by a construction crew, or experience a change in the weather. The more sturdy and flexible our clients are, and the more experience we have in working outdoors, the easier it is for us to capitalize on these experiences and deepen our therapeutic partnership.

You'll be most relaxed and effective at the outset if you begin your work in the natural world with clients who are healthier; however, with increased experience, you'll be able to do this work with all but your most fragile clients.

Barbara, a 30-year-old, anxious, eating-disordered client, had been in therapy with me for several years. Her symptoms had diminished, but she continued to be withdrawn and passive in session--looking down at the floor, not really present. I'd tried several approaches, including inviting family members and friends to the session and giving her homework assignments, like initiating simple conversations with coworkers, but Barbara refused to participate in them. Then I decided to take the session outdoors, hoping the change in environment and the demands of negotiating this new challenge would break through her habitual constricted responses. Usually, I explain to clients my rationale for doing therapy outdoors, but to avoid heightening Barbara's fears, I casually invited

her to go for a walk with me outside, and she agreed.

It was dusk and children were laughing nearby. My only suggestion to Barbara as we started to walk was that she lift her gaze from the sidewalk to see what was going on around us. In a few minutes, she stopped to look at some red tulips and then to smell the honeysuckle bushes.

Soon Barbara was more fully present than she'd ever been in the office. Now I asked her to lead our walk, so she could experience being in charge. At first, she was tentative, but she soon walked with more confidence and led us to a bench on the edge of a playground. For the rest of the session, we talked comfortably about what was going on around us, and Barbara led the walk back to the office.

Once Barbara and I had both experienced her as a more active partner, it was a lot harder for her to go back to the old, closed stance. In fact, she began our next session looking down again, but then, with a wry grin, said, "I suppose you want me to look up." The session outdoors had awakened her senses and her curiosity, and had jolted her out of her constricted space. While she had lots more work to do, she remained more present and engaged in our sessions. She asked questions, and even made suggestions about our work together.

One particularly powerful use of an outdoor session is creating ceremonies and rituals to mark transitions, celebrate achievements, and encourage transformation. In the natural world, you're surrounded by signs of change and connected in an immediate and concrete way to the cycle of life and death. You see clouds moving across the sky, water rushing over rocks, and fresh shoots emerging from a dead tree stump. In offering us these images, nature normalizes change and loss, providing a healing and hopeful model for letting go of what's gone and opening up to what may come.

Sam's son was a New York police officer who was killed in the 9/11 attacks. As we neared the end of our work on his grieving, I suggested that he develop a ritual to say goodbye to his son and begin the rest of his life. Sam welcomed the idea, and after some planning, we met for a session by a lake.

At a secluded section at the edge of the water, Sam and I gathered rocks and built a fire. We watched as the flames rose and the sun began to set. Sam told stories about his son and then read the transcripts of his son's final phone call, which the NYPD had given him. He wept as he finished, then fed the fire with the crumpled pages. Departing from plan, he sang a farewell song in full voice, and then hurled several of the burning pieces of wood into the water. He then had an imagined farewell conversation with his son, in which, Sam said, his son told him, "Sometimes you must go into a burning building."

Rituals can be created in an office, of course, but nature offers more possibilities for impact. The power of this ritual came from the fire, the setting sun, the expansive space that allowed Sam to burst into song, and the water. As we left, Sam carefully collected the ashes and took them home.

While going outdoors may begin as an experiment to help shift a stuck client or to mark a transition, you're likely to be surprised by the collateral benefits that emerge. By having the courage to leave the office, we model for our clients a willingness to risk something new in order to move the therapy forward.

Going outdoors heightens our senses and enhances a central goal of our work: promoting presence. A session in nature slows us down, widens our field of vision, engenders a spaciousness inside us, and makes us receptive to an approaching storm cloud, the unexpected cry of a crow, or the sudden appearance of a chipmunk. Through what I call, "free associating

with the natural world," the client may imbue outdoor experiences with meaning that deepens the work. One client, slipping into a delightful reverie, noticed that up until that moment, she'd barely been aware that the birds were singing. Musing aloud, she imagined that they were singing for no other reason than their own pleasure and realized in a flash that she was stressed out and working way too hard. If we take the risk of going outdoors, we may even discover that we, as therapists, have been working too hard as well. n

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